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# A Poor Man's Art: Mexican Retablos from Philadelphia Collections

La Salle University Art Museum

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# A Poor Man's Art:

Mexican Retablos from Philadelphia Collections



La Salle University  
Art Museum

October 3, 2005 till January 4, 2006



## **A Poor Man's Art: Mexican *Retablos***

The term *retablo* derives from the Low Latin *retaulus* and High Latin *retro tabulum*, meaning "behind the (altar) table." Before 1800, the term was used to describe the large altarpieces in gilt frames seen in churches throughout Mexico. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, however, the term came to have a second meaning, referring to the small altarpieces or religious images, which were occasionally commissioned, but usually sold in booths outside churches for private consumption. Produced for roughly one hundred years, these private devotional *retablos* were supplanted by chromolithographs in the early part of the twentieth century. Twenty-five of these small images are on exhibition here. For the sake of clarity, I refer to these works exclusively as *retablos*.

Both the large church altarpieces and *retablos* were intended for devotion, but the former were intended for contemplation by large congregations in a public setting, whereas the latter were meant for devotion within the home. The modest dimensions of these works with their fine details made them, in fact, eminently suitable for quiet meditation. Research has shown that their owners often propped them up on dressers and surrounded them with other devotional objects, creating a kind of shrine or sacred space.

Economic factors further help to explain some of the differences we find between the large altarpieces and the *retablos*. Thus, whereas church altarpieces were painted by established artists on relatively expensive pieces of canvas, and sometimes copper, *retablos* were painted on tin by largely anonymous artists.

The artists's choice of support reflects not only the financial circumstances of their patrons, but also, in the case of the *retablo* artists, a desire to imitate their more expensive counterparts. Tin, which was imported to Mexico for industrial purposes in the late eighteenth century, was valued by *retablo* artists both for its low cost and for its similarity with the costly copper. As with copper, paint adhered well to tin and it was also very durable.

Indeed, *retablo* artists found in their expensive counterparts much to emulate: not only did they follow the compositions of artists like the well-known seventeenth-century master Jusepe de Ribera, but also they continued to model their work on subjects disseminated centuries earlier throughout the Spanish colonies. *Retablo* artists were in essence copyists, remaining faithful to traditional iconography. Despite these modest pretensions, the names of the *retablo* artists are for the most part unknown, though some share stylistic traits, suggesting that they worked together in workshops.

wars. In The effort *retablo* artists put into imbuing their humble works with an aura of magnificence is evident, moreover, in the attention they lavished on their frames. A number of the works included in this exhibition are shown in their original frames. These framing devices were intended not only to do honor to the images, but also in some cases to imitate the grand gilt frames their makers saw on church altarpieces. To create their frames and sconces, Mexican tinsmiths reworked cans, occasionally even making small niches in which to place paintings.

The era of these *retablos* coincides with a difficult period in Mexican history: after winning independence from Spain in 1821, Mexico was ravaged by civil that turbulence, it is likely that the *retablos* offered some solace.

## **Saints**

The faithful prayed to individual saints to intercede on their behalf and to offer them protection. In addition, each social station and profession celebrated a patron. A baby usually received the name of a saint on whose day it was born and who consequently became its patron saint. Many *retablos* were, therefore, bought by those named after saints or by those working in certain professions. It was equally common for persons seeking safety or the cure from an affliction to pray to individual saints.

## **1. San Jeronimo**

**[St. Jerome, Patron of scholars, philosophers, librarians, book editors and translators] ,**

***Collection of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein***

One of the Church Fathers, Jerome was responsible for translating the Old Testament from Hebrew into Latin. In *retablo* art, he is usually shown as a hermit in the desert surrounded by his books and crucifix, which bear testimony to his scholarship and penance. Jerome withdrew to the wilderness for four years after he had a vision of Christ judging him. The disembodied trumpet in the top right refers to the Last Judgment. Jerome was sought for protection against temptation and want. He was also the patron of scholars, philosophers and librarians.

## **2. San Pascual de Bailón**

**[Saint Paschal, Baylon, patron of cooks and of the kitchen],**

***Collection of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein***

Paschal receives his name from Whitsunday, the day on which he was born. From his 7<sup>th</sup> to his 24<sup>th</sup> year, Paschal was a shepherd after which he was admitted to the barefoot Friars Minor. He was particularly devoted to the Eucharist, to which he prayed for hours on end. In this image, a miraculous vision of the host appears in the kitchen hearth.

### **3. *San Francisco de Paula***

**[St. Francis of Paola, Patron of naval officers, navigators, maritime pilots, and other associated with the sea. Invoked for protection against flames, leprosy, blindness, childlessness and shipwreck.]**

***Collection of St. Joseph's University***

Named after the shrine of the more famous Saint Francis of Assisi, this Italian saint became a hermit and founded the Order of Minims or Hermits of Saint Francis in 1474. In addition to following the three vows of the Franciscans, those of poverty, chastity and obedience, the Order added a fourth: humility. St. Francis of Paola, so-called because he wanted to be the least in the house of God, is credited with miraculous cures, raising the dead and averting the plague. He was an extremely popular subject in *retablo* art, where he is traditionally shown as an older man with a gray beard wearing a Franciscan habit and with the inscription, *caritas*. Often he is also shown with a lamb emerging from the fiery oven, symbolizing the saint's miraculous recovery of his pet lamb, Martinello. This particular *retablo*, however, is an unusual half-length treatment of the saint, focusing almost exclusively on the saint's face.



**4. *San Rafael* [St. Raphael]  
*Collection of St. Joseph's University***

Raphael, meaning "God Heals," is the Archangel whom God engages to heal the blindness of Tobit. Reference to this role is evident in the *retablos* inclusion of the fish, with whose gall Raphael instructed Tobit's son, Tobias, to heal his father's eyes. Raphael, to whom the faithful prayed for safe journey as well as against eye ailments, plagues and even malaria, was very popular in Mexico.

**5. *Santa Apolonia, Virgen y Martir*  
[St. Appolonia, Virgin and Martyr]  
*Collection of St. Joseph's University***

St. Appolonia, a third-century saint and martyr, was commanded to worship a pagan idol. Having converted to Christianity, she resisted this kind of idolatry, and after she made the sign of the cross, the statue shattered into pieces. For this act of defiance, she was tied to a column and her teeth were pulled out, after which she was burned alive. Here she is shown held by two Roman soldiers, wearing short tunics and helmets, as they begin to pull the teeth from her mouth. A distant beam of divine light casts an unearthly light on the scene.

## **6. San Camillo de Leliz,**

### ***Patron de les agonisantes***

**[St. Camillus of Lellis, patron of doctors, the sick, hospitals, nurses, nursing, gambling and is also invoked for a happy death]**

***Collection of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein***

Often referred to as the "Red Cross Saint", Camillus instituted humane hospital treatment. In *retablos*, as in this example, Camillus is usually shown nursing a man on his deathbed to whom he appears to be administering the last rites. The dead man's spirit has been wrested from the devils and evil spirits, seen to the right of the dying man. Speech bubbles emerge from the mouths of these ghoulish monsters, revealing their resentment of the saint's intervention. Canonized in 1746 by Pope Leo XIII, Camillus is the patron saint of the sick.

## **7. San Miguel**

**[St. Michael, invoked by sinners against temptation and at the hour of death]**

***Collection of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein***

Michael is one of the seven archangels and the protector of the Church Militant. For this reason, *retablo* artists usually depict him young, dressed in a coat of mail and armed with a sword. Like nearly all angels, Michael has wings and he is usually depicted standing victoriously over Satan. For his participation in the *Last Judgment*, Michael is typically also depicted with a pair of scales in his hand with which he weighs the souls of the dead.

## **8. *Santa Librata***

**[St. Wilgefortis, Virgin and Martyr; Patroness of laundresses, invoked during moments of distress and headaches]**

***Collection of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein***

A fictional saint, legend has it that Librata was one of either seven or nine children, born simultaneously to the wife of a pagan king of Portugal. All of them converted to Christianity and were martyred. Librata's vow to remain a virgin was tested when her father wanted her to marry the king of Sicily. Her prayers were answered when she grew a beard and mustache, and the king promptly lost interest in her. In a rage, Librata's father crucified her. Spanish and Mexican representations of the saint, as seen here, never show her with a beard, but usually as a young woman, crucified, wearing a wreath of flowers and surrounded by palm fronds, emblems of her martyrdom.

## **Copies**

Except for some rare cases, *retablo* artists worked anonymously, probably in workshops. Both their working conditions and the fact that *retablo* artists adhered to traditional iconographies encouraged this conformity. It is not uncommon to find paintings that are close if not exact copies of one another.

**9. and 10. *El Divino Rostro*  
[Veronica's Veil or The Divine Face],  
two versions  
*Collection of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein***

Apocryphal sources claim that Veronica, moved by the suffering of Christ on his ascent to Calvary, wiped his sweat and blood-covered face with a cloth, leaving on it a perfect impression of the holy face. Historically, this face was believed to represent the true likeness (*vera eikon*) of Christ. Both images represent Jesus with long curly hair, and dark beard, revealing the degree to which his features were standardized.

**11. and 12. *El Niño de Atocha*  
[The Child of Atocha or The Child  
Missionary], two versions  
*Collection of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein***

These representations of Christ are among the most popular in retablo art. The image has its origins in the Moorish invasion of Atocha in Spain. The Moors imprisoned many Christians, who suffered greatly from hunger, but could only receive acts of mercy from children. Their families prayed for deliverance and one day a child dressed as a pilgrim visited the prison with food and water. Legend has it that even after this child had fed all the prisoners, his basket and flask was still full. Typically, the child wears a hat with a wide brim and plume and in his left hand he holds a pilgrim's staff. Sometimes he also holds ears of wheat and a pair of shackles, references to his jailhouse visits.

### **13., 14., and 15. *San Isidro Labrador***

**[Saint Isidore, the Farmer; Patron of farmers, invoked for good weather and the harvest] , three versions**

***Collections of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein and of St. Joseph's University***

San Isidro, the patron saint of farmers, was one of Mexico's most common and popular saints among the peasants. He was born, the son of a poor family near Madrid, in the early twelfth century. Both extremely devout and hard working, Isidro worked as a farm laborer for a wealthy landowner, John de Vargas, until his death. Because he refused to stop working on Sundays, God sent a series of natural plagues to force him to observe the Sabbath. Eventually, after God threatened to send him bad neighbors, Isidro agreed to treat Sundays as a Day of Rest and to attend church.

The images shown here reflect another story. According to legend, God sent an angel to plough Isidro's fields when his fellow workers complained that he was late for work each morning because he went to mass. Though the images vary in the specifics of the landscape and of the figure's attitude, the descriptive details are standard to them all. Each of the images represents Isidro in an attitude of piety, with at least one hand on his chest. In the background, the angel ploughing the fields and the church he attended are clearly visible. Other iconographic details are also standard, including the wide-brimmed farmer's hat, a bag, and gourd for water. Two of the images also show him with a staff, which he struck to create a stream that quenched his master's thirst. The inclusion of birds and even rabbits, express the saint's love of animals. The clouds

seen on the horizon symbolize the saint's role as an intercessor for rain.

## **Christ, the Holy Family and the Passion**

After the Virgin, Christ was the most common subject among *retablo* artists. While many of the images focused on the suffering and passion of Christ, as well as on themes of Redemption, others offered humanizing views of Christ's family and intimate relationship with his father and mother.

### **16. *El Santo Nino Perdido***

#### **[The Holy Lost Child]**

***Collection of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein***

The Holy Lost Child refers to the period of three days when the Boy Jesus remained in the Temple of Jerusalem. This particular image depicts a sculpture that stood on an altar, as evident by the vases of roses framing the figure. A variety of coins and silver replicas of parts of the body, also known as *ex-votos*, are attached to the figure. These silver offerings were gifts by the faithful to the Christ Child for his help in relieving their afflictions.

**17. *La Sagrada Familia* [The Holy Family]  
*Collection of St. Joseph's University***

The Holy Family consists of the nuclear earthly family of Jesus, the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph holding hands. This earthly family has its counterpart in the Holy Trinity, comprising God the Father, God the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

**18. *San José* [St. Joseph, patron of the universal church, carpenters, cabinet builders, doubters, happy death, and the homeless. In Mexico he is also the patron of travels, the militant church and the evangelization of the Americas]  
*Collection of St. Joseph's University***

St. Joseph is Mary's husband and the earthly father of Christ. Here he is shown without the Virgin, but in the company of his son, whom he holds in his arms. The flowering rod he grasps refers to the fable of his miraculous selection as the Virgin's husband. Unlike many Western examples in which Joseph is depicted as an aging man, in *retablo* art he is commonly shown as a youthful and vital father. Images of Joseph with his son are the counterpart to traditional pictures of the Virgin and Child.

The cult of Joseph has its origins especially in the fifteenth century, where he was revered not only as a patron of travelers and wood workers, but also as a model husband, benevolent father and safe refuge in times of danger. The inclusion of the soul in

purgatory, seen in the bottom right corner of the picture, alludes to Joseph's powers as an intercessor.

**19. *El Señor de las Penas* [The Lord of Suffering]  
*Collection of St. Joseph's University***

Like the previous image, this painting represents a venerated sculpture. Paintings of statues were quite common in the Colonial Americas, and belong to a tradition that continues in Mexican devotional *retablos*. Characteristically, the statue is shown on an altar flanked by flowers. Here the conceit is further developed by the drapes that are pulled back on either side to reveal the figure of Christ. The image depicts Christ carrying the cross, a common subject in Colonial Spanish painting and sculpture. Here he is shown wearing the scarlet robe in which Pilate's soldiers dressed him and with a rope around his neck. Images such as these were designed to have a deep emotional effect on the viewer by allowing the viewer to meditate on Christ's suffering.

**20. *La Alegoría de la Redención*  
[The Allegory of Redemption]  
*Collection of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein***

The crucified Christ appears between the Virgin of Sorrows on the left and the Archangel Michael, weighing souls, on the right. The skull beneath the cross is Adam's and refers to the



role the crucified Christ plays in redeeming mankind and in reversing the Fall. Among the souls suffering in purgatory, it is not surprising, therefore, to see those of Adam and Eve, whose original sin had to be overcome by the Crucifixion.

### **21. *Los Cincos Señores* [The Five Lords] Collection of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein**

The five “lords” represented here above the bleeding hand are Christ in the middle, framed by his parents, Mary and Joseph, who themselves are flanked by Mary’s parents, Saint Anne and Saint Joachim. Blood pours from the disembodied hand into a chalice below.

The meaning of this curious image has been the subject of two recent essays. Scholars now agree that *Los Cincos Señores* is an allegory of the doctrine of grace. Accordingly, the blood that flows from the hand represents the grace poured forth on humanity by Christ’s passion. Christ is shown together with his family in order to convey Christ’s humanity and his role in the redemption of mankind.

### **The Virgin**

Mexico is occasionally referred to as “The Land of Mary” for its particular devotion to the Virgin. While some of the images show her alone, the majority depict her with Christ or make reference to the Passion. More rarely, *retablo* artists focus on the Virgin’s childhood and education.

**22. *Santa Ana* [St. Anne]  
Collection of St. Joseph's University**

*Retablos* do not usually depict Anne on her own, but together with other saints or with her daughter, Mary. Here the focus is not so much on Anne, as on the Virgin and on her education by her mother. Anne is depicted as an older woman tenderly embracing her daughter as she teaches her to read. Images such as these emphasized the role good parenting played in the education of children.

**23. *Mater Dolorosa* [Our Lady of Sorrows]  
Collection of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein**

Our Lady of Sorrows is a common iconographic type in Western art. Typically, such images show the Virgin with seven daggers piercing her breast, symbolizing the seven sorrows that arise from Christ's Passion. In *retablo* art, however, it is also common to find images showing the Virgin pierced by a single sword. Here she is shown half-length with a dagger in her left breast, her head drooping onto her right shoulder and with her hands clasped over her chest. The instruments of the Passion surround her.

**24. *Mary, Queen of Heaven*, oil on canvas,  
Gift of Jay Robert Stiefel**

**25. *La Piedad* or *La Lamentación el Llanto sobre Cristo Muerto* (The Pietà or The Lamentation for the Dead Christ)  
*Collection of St. Joseph's University***

Christ's dead body has been removed from the cross and is draped across lap of the Virgin, whose sorrow is manifested not only by the mournful expression on her face, but also by the dagger that symbolically pierces her chest. Like the body of Christ, which is exhibited so that the viewer can actively meditate on his wounds and suffering, the instruments of the passion are laid out in the foreground for the viewer to contemplate.

**26. *Nuestra Senora de la Encarnación* [Our Lady of the Incarnation, popularly called the Soul of Mary]  
*Collection of Joseph D. and Janet M. Shein***

The Incarnation refers to the moment when God sent the Archangel Gabriel, to announce to the Virgin that she will be the mother of Christ as the Holy Spirit comes upon her. Here she is shown in an attitude of humility with her hands on her chest, with the Holy Ghost hovering above. In her hands she holds lilies and roses (without thorns), both references to the Old Testament Song of Songs, which presages the Virgin's purity and virginity.

**Madeleine Viljoen, Director**

***The La Salle University Art Museum is very grateful to St. Joseph's University as well as to Mr. Joseph D. and Mrs. Janet M. Shein for generously lending their works to the exhibition.***